



Embodying Life As God Intended

"When we talk about the church in 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' we are presupposing that the community between people and God, which is the work of the Spirit, reaches out beyond the church... The church has no monopoly of the Holy Spirit. Nor is the Spirit under its control. The precise opposite is the case: The Spirit binds the church to itself and has the church under its control. It is concerned about the church... for the sake of the rebirth of life and the new creation of all things"

Jürgen Moltmann,

The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life (1997)

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to spend a week with a small group of academics and “social ministry practitioners” at the Spring Institute of Lived Theology, led by Charles Marsh of the University of Virginia. Professor Jürgen Moltmann, who grew up in Nazi Germany, spoke from life experience about the darkness of humanity lived apart from the Spirit of God. Quoting Vladimir Lenin, who said, “Trust is good, control better,” Moltmann presented a cautionary word about the evolution of a “security state” whenever a society’s government operates out of fear and distrust, particularly of its own citizens. A culture of control prevails, accompanied by mechanisms of total surveillance, and this leads inevitably to political repression and violence. “Controls spread mistrust, and mistrust turns the truth into lies; but the lie is the power which destroys life,” explained Moltmann.

Ultimately, however, his public lecture, “In God We Trust, in Us God

Trusters: On Freedom and Security in a Free World,” pointed us to the One through whom trust is made possible. Trust, which is “the necessary habitat for freedom,” is founded on the loving God of the universe, who endures our sickness, bears our sins, and shares our grief and sorrows. Moltmann compelled us to marvel in a gracious God who invites sinners into a covenant relationship of mutual trust. God entrusts his Church with the task of manifesting his glory on earth, which is demonstrated when our trust in God, rather than Mammon, produces joyous community where trust and freedom flourish and where no one is in want. The Spirit of God enables us to pursue such community with confidence, despite our own fallenness, through the gifts of confession, forgiveness, and repentance. Life as God intended is born anew, and the watching world is given a sign of hope.

I could not listen to Moltmann without thinking about our nation’s college-educated, gainfully employed congregations, including my own in San Francisco. Are we embodying life as God intended, to those we reach out to? Or are we simply mirroring the American cultural disposition to control? Is our community life being shaped by the Spirit of God, or by the impulse to secure, by whatever means necessary, our economic well-being, career advancement, retirement accounts, children’s future, materially equipped homes, physical safety, social standing, or respectable religiosity? Is it evident to others that “in God we trust,” or are we merely bearing witness to our ability to work the system to our advantage? Are we simply state-protected market beneficiaries clothed with a thin religious veneer?

Through our neighborhood ministries, we who are accustomed to being in control are becoming increasingly aware of others being adversely affected

by institutions of control. Such encounters are eye-opening. A pastor advocates for a family inadvertently caught in the middle of an Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid. A college student is deported back to South America by the Department of Homeland Security simply because she was short a single credit for the semester. A young woman is forced to return to Central America immediately after being physically assaulted at an increasingly militarized border. Low-income families face aggressive military recruiting among their children at the local high school, due to the student-records access provision embedded in the No Child Left Behind policy. An aunt grieves how numb to violence her teenage nephew has become, hearing him brag about the shooting and maiming he “got to do” in Iraq. A wife despairs over the angry and detached man her wounded husband has become after extended National Guard duty.

Fear breeds mistrust, which inflames the need to control. Institutional controls spread further mistrust, turning truths to lies, which ultimately destroy life. The Spirit of God fosters lives of confession, forgiveness, and repentance, regenerating human community the way God intended. Moltmann graciously confronts us with an uncomfortable choice. Trust or control? Life or death? American church, which will it be? What will characterize our collective lives? Are we able to tell the difference, discern the fruit, or read the signs? If so, are we prepared to choose? ■

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